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Matters of Grave Import: To Go Gentle

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Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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Abstract

Applies the archetypes of the Waite-Colman tarot deck to the characters and situations of the Star Wars movies.

Additional Keywords

Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back (film)—Relation to Tarot; Tarot in film; Williams, Charles.

Arthuriad—Third Heaven; Edith Crowe

MATTERS OF GRAVE IMPORT

GRACIA FAY ELLWOOD

Having doffed my editorial hat (it's pleasant to feel wind in one's hair again!) and still having the option of a column in *Mythlore*, there loomed before me the task of choosing a name for it. I settled on the above as a counterbalance to Lee Speth's irresponsible "Cavalier Treatment." In contrast to my friend and colleague, whose otherwise excellent mind is a positive hotbed of Joy, Fun, Humour, etc., I am temperamentally inclined to contemplate Matters of Grave Import: God, Archetypes, The Peril of the World, Unconditional Love, Ultimate Transformation, κ.τ.λ. The name also seemed suitable in view of the fact that the columns are quite likely to touch on--even elaborate on--my favorite subject, Death-and-Rebirth, the theme that draws together everything that interests me ('cept maybe embroidery).

* * *

TO GO GENTLE

The Empire Strikes Back is a powerful work of the imagination which can bear up under repeated viewing and close analysis, and continue to yield wealth (along with a little dross). While it is interesting to compare Lucas' use of archetypal figures and patterns with Tolkien's, the set of images in the Tarot deck, baptized by Williams in *The Greater Trumps*, provide parallels of no less interest. (Interest, that is, for those of us who never tire of archetypes; for the Loyal Opposition, there are forty-seven other pages in this issue!)

Williams employed a deck which names the first card the Juggler, but the Arthur Waite-Pamela Colman deck of course has as No. I the Magician. This magus-figure possesses supernatural control over the four elements, symbolized by the pentacle, sword and cup before him and the wand held aloft. Both Obi-wan and Yoda, with their command of the Force, have something of the Magician about them; they are also magus-figures in their guidance of Luke. The symbol of eternity ∞ over the Magician's head means that he is not limited by time and space; again we are reminded of Obi-wan after his death.

These parallels are a little tenuous. Those with the Hermit, IX, are harder to miss. Both characters, when we meet them, are living as hermits in desolate landscapes. The Hermit's lamp in the darkness can well mean hope (at the beginning Leia calls Ben "my only hope"); the staff is an instrument of power a little like the lightsaber.

No. VIII, The Chariot, quickly calls to mind the *Millenium Falcon*, which has been called "that trusty hotrod of outer space"; both have associations with drive, technical virtuosity, the extension of human power in the person of its driver. The castles in the background and the wings on the front of Waite-Colman's Chariot suggest warfare and flight, both part of the definition of the *Falcon*; but the two very sedentary sphinxes do not fit in here as well as the two horses on the card Williams uses. (The sphinxes might possibly suggest the dark and bright side of the Force with which Luke must deal.)

The Empress, No. III, lightly suggests Princess Leia. While Leia is conspicuously virginal and the Empress' flowing gown hints that she may be pregnant, the heart and the Mirror of Venus (♀) on the Empress' throne, and Leia's position as the

desirable female, say essentially the same thing. The lush organic setting of the Empress calls up Leia's family name Organa. (The parallels are admittedly not completely compelling.)

Three cards, the Knight of Swords, Strength (VIII) and Temperance (XIV) all have to do with Luke's relation to his inner self and the Force. "Much anger in him," says Yoda. The Knight, charging through a windblown landscape with sword aloft, represents the aggressive side of Luke which he must learn to control before the benign power of the Force will flow through him. It is not fully controlled at any time in the *Empire*; he takes the initiative in a fight more than once despite Ben's and Yoda's instructions. The Knight of Swords is Luke's own inner potential Darth Vader. Strength is a human figure closing a lion's mouth; it is the process of gaining control over this destructive inner self, which Luke is undergoing. Temperance is the hoped-for end result of this training; a winged haloed figure ("luminous beings are we") pours water from one cup to another with complete control; its life-giving power is at his command. He is at home both in water and on land, in the finite and the infinite.

The Waite-Colman Emperor (IV) more closely resembles Lucas' Emperor than does Williams' neutral seated figure. In Waite's the background is barren rock, the sky is red, the throne is decorated with the skulls of animals. Armored under his robes, the Emperor (in contrast to the Empress) is interested in making war not love.

The Lovers (VI) suggest Han and Leia, without development; they do not reach the point of being blessed by a serene angelic figure under a bright sun as do the Waite-Colman pair. In fact Han and Leia are more like the unfortunate lovers of No. XV, chained prisoners of the Devil, the male about to be put to the flame of his torch.

No. XIII, Death, in the Waite-Colman deck bears even stronger resemblance to Darth Vader (the resemblance in names can hardly be accidental) than does the Devil. Death even wears black armor and helmet (no breath-mask!), and has human figures fallen or falling around him.

Waite-Colman's Four of Swords has three swords mounted on a cathedral wall above a tomb with a death-mask (the fourth sword is on the side of the tomb). The stone figure even has his hands extended upward in uncanny resemblance to Han, calling attention to the significance of Han's suspended animation as a symbolic death.

The Hanged Man (XII) has probably the strongest parallel of all with a theme in the *Empire*. No one can fail to notice Luke's tendency to get suspended upside-down throughout the story: first in the Wampa Ice Creature's lair, then during his training with Yoda, and finally, wounded, in his extremity on the inverted cross of the Cloud City's weathervane. The serenity in the face of Waite-Colman's Hanged Man, and the nimbus surrounding his head, indicate that some supernatural power has been tapped. Something similar is taking place in Luke when he is inverted--he becomes a channel of the Force--though in none of them does he achieve the complete suspension above human frailty and pain that the Hanged Man does. He is not yet complete.

Finally, but not least, we have the Fool, who has no number -- 0. Waite-Colman's Fool is a

Continued on page 21

27 *Ibid.*: 271. 28 *Ibid.*: 277. 29 *Ibid.*: 278.
 30 Lewis 1964: 122. 31 Lewis 1955: 104. 32 *Ibid.*
 33 H.R. Ellis, Gods and Myths of Northern Europe
 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964): 28.
 34 *Ibid.*: 39-44. 35 Larousse 1960: 182.
 36 *Ibid.*: 183. 37 *Ibid.*: 182.
 38 Guthrie 1950: 155. 39 Larousse, 1960: 183.
 40 *Ibid.*: 220. 41 *Ibid.*: 184.
 42 John Pinsent, Greek Mythology (London: Hamlyn,
 1969): 43.
 43 *Ibid.*
 44 Jacob Grimm, Teutonic Mythology (Gloucester,
 Mass.: Peter Smith, 1976 [1883]): II, 449.
 45 *Ibid.*: 448. 46 *Ibid.*: 518. 47 Lewis 1964: 123.
 48 Beowulf, translated by Michael Alexander (Har-
 mondsworth: Penguin, 1973): 54.
 49 Lewis 1951: 138. 50 *Ibid.*: 142.
 51 Lewis 1964: 134. 52 *Ibid.*: 135. 53 *Ibid.*: 136.
 54 *Ibid.*: 137. 55 *Ibid.*: 138. 56 Lewis 1952: 114.
 57 Patmore 1968: 88.
 58 C.S. Lewis, A Mind Awake, edited by Clyde S.
 Kilby (London: Bles, 1968): 219.
 59 Lewis 1950: 86. 60 *Ibid.*: 88. 61 *Ibid.*
 62 Clement C. Miles, Christmas Customs and Tra-
 ditions (New York: Dover, 1976): 220.
 63 *Ibid.*: 240. 64 *Ibid.*: 233.
 65 William Sansom, A Book of Christmas (Toronto:
 McGraw-Hill, 1968): 100.
 66 *Ibid.*: 103. 67 *Ibid.*: 104. 68 *Ibid.*
 69 Joan M. Vastokas, "The Shamanistic Tree of
 Life," artscanada, December 1973/January 1974: 149.

70 Lewis 1950: 24. 71 *Ibid.*: 23. 72 *Ibid.*: 24.
 73 *Ibid.* 74 *Ibid.*: 32-33.
 75 Hans Christian Anderson, The Snow Queen, trans-
 lated by R. P. Keigiven (New York: Charles Scrib-
 ners Sons, 1972).
 76 *Ibid.*: 24. 77 *Ibid.*: 26.

III. The God of Love

1 The Golden Ass of Apuleius, translated by Robert
 Graves (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1950): 118.
 2 *Ibid.* 3 *Ibid.*: 119. 4 *Ibid.* 5 *Ibid.*: 121.
 6 *Ibid.*: 128. 7 *Ibid.*: 133. 8 *Ibid.*: 133-134.
 9 Lewis 1956: 112.
 10 S.G.F. Brandon, Religion in Ancient History
 (London: George Allen and Unwin): 79.
 11 Leonard Von Matt and Francis Trochu, St. Berna-
 dette (London: Longmans Green and Co., 1957): 18.
 12 C.G. Jung, Symbols of Transformation (Prince-
 ton, N.J.: Bollingen, 1956): 240f.
 13 *Ibid.*: 422.
 14 Mircea Eliade, Rites and Symbols of Initiation
 (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958): 85.
 15 *Ibid.* 16 *Ibid.*: 95. 17 Lewis 1956: 301.
 18 *Ibid.*: 307. 19 *Ibid.*: 308.
 20 Eliade 1958: 111. 21 Jung 1958: 138.
 22 Gracia Fay Ellwood, "Both God's and Mary's
 Son," Queen of All Hearts, January-February, 1976:
 15.

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serene young man gazing up into space as he steps toward the edge of a cliff. A flower in one hand, a torn purse hanging from a stick in the other hand, he is clearly living in the immediate moment, which is by ordinary expectations very likely to be his last. A furry dog beside him is in the same dangerous position. Williams' Fool is deliberately kept a figure of mystery. "There are no writings which speak of the Fool." Somehow this figure is both in motion and at rest, in the center and every-where else. As represented by Sybil, we know that the Fool has gone through a fearsome ordeal and emerged totally balanced, sovereign.

The chief characteristic Williams' Fool has in common with other conceptions is that her (Sybil's) actions and perceptions can be incomprehensible by ordinary prudential standards. But she succeeds. The old bromide "It's so crazy it just might work" applies to the Fool.

In the first story Luke is sometimes a fool in the Parsifal-like sense of a naive, unripe youth, brought up in the midst of nowhere, ignorant of his identity, who sets out to discover himself. As he begins to use the Force he has to do foolish things such as practice with his lightsaber while blindfolded, and later turn off his computer when zeroing in on the Deathstar.

From the perspective of the magi Ben and Yoda, Luke is a fool when he interrupts his training to go off to rescue Han and Leia. "Reckless is he! Now things are worse." Yet in following his heart, Luke turns out to be wiser than they. Though he does not succeed in freeing Han, had he not come Han might have been tortured to death; and the distraction created by his presence enables Leia and the others to escape, so that they in turn can rescue him, still uncorrupted by the Dark Side.

Han is even more obviously the Fool; he does not understand himself, acts recklessly on impulse, and often plunges into extreme danger from which he emerges unhurt because the very wildness of his actions upsets others' calculations. (He also has a furry companion; and their personalities are not

completely unlike.) Han charges down a corridor in the Deathstar after twenty stormtroopers, who flee on the assumption that he has a good reason for what he is doing. He courts a princess with insufferable arrogance. He goes out into the arctic night of Hoth on a doomed beast. He plunges into an asteroid field. He speeds down an unknown asteroid tunnel which turns out to be the belly of a monster. He attacks Darth Vader's destroyer with his gnat of a ship. And he wins out. It is ironic that when his actions seem to him completely prudent--flying to Bespin--he is unknowingly going into the greatest danger of all, to the place where he will finally fall.

When we meet Han he believes his own bluster; he thinks of himself as mercenary and self-seeking, and only learns that he is really loyal and caring when he finds himself doing loyal and caring things. At the verge of the pit he reaches a new stage in his life. Out of love for his friend he weighs the odds, refuses reckless action, does the prudent thing: he goes gentle into that good night. So when he is undergoing the ultimate descent of the Fool, motionless in the central position of the Fool, he is for the first time not acting like a fool at all.

